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C O N F I D E N T I A L RANGOON 000105

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV; PACOM FOR FPA

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SUBJECT: BURMA: MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF SENIOR SPDC AIDE SPARKS
RUMORS OF POWER STRUGGLE

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: The mysterious death on January 21 of SPDC Vice Chairman Maung Aye's personal assistant sparked rumors of a senior regime power struggle, but as of COB January 25 the SPDC is carrying on with business as usual and nothing appears to be amiss in Rangoon. Sources are inconsistent on the cause of the aide's death, but suicide is a strong possibility. SPDC plans to fill a junta vacancy (that has existed since PM Khin Nyunt's October ouster) could have sparked the recent spate of rumors. Such a move could precipitate a larger shuffle, but the GOB has yet to make any official announcement. End Summary.

2. (U) Little is known about the circumstances surrounding the mysterious death on January 21 of Lt Colonel Bo Win Tun, the 42 year-old personal assistant of SPDC Vice Chairman Maung Aye. According to obituaries published in the regime's official newspaper on January 23, Bo Win Tun passed away at 11:00 p.m. "while on duty." An Emboff observed the military funeral for the deceased officer, which took place on January

23. Several dozen SPDC and GOB cabinet members attended, including Maung Aye.

3. (C) According to credible Embassy sources, Bo Win Tun died in his office, located at the Ministry of Defense main compound in northern Rangoon. The compound houses offices for Maung Aye and SPDC Chairman Than Shwe, and was the venue for a quarterly meeting of the 12-member junta that apparently concluded on the afternoon of January 21 (a 13th slot in the SPDC has been vacate since the October 2004 ouster of former PM Khin Nyunt).

4. (C) Sources are less certain, and less consistent, about the cause of death. Well-connected military sources revealed to Emboffs that Bo Win Tun committed suicide (with a sidearm) following a harsh reprimand earlier in the day from Maung Aye for carrying on an extramarital affair. A number of opposition and local contacts speculate that Bo Win Tun was the victim of a botched assassination attempt against Maung Aye, but sheepishly admit that their information is coming from rumors broadcast by the Oslo-based Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB).

5. (SBU) Several exile media outlets also reported rumors that, following the mysterious death, Senior General Than Shwe had arrested Maung Aye and PM Soe Thin. However, on January 25 Embassy sources observed top SPDC leaders carrying out their regular schedules and there were no signs of unusual activity in Rangoon. Rumors have been consistent in recent weeks that the SPDC plans to fill the vacant S-2 position, which could precipitate a shuffle of regional military commanders and other members of the regime. Rumors of a shuffle are plausible, but the GOB has made no official announcement.
Martinez